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Racial Ethnic Identity and Career Development Concerns of College Students from Immigrant African and Hmong Families

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Introduction

Research has shown that an understanding of racial ethnic identity development is vital for effective counseling of culturally diverse college students (Jourdan, 2006; Myrick, 2002; Sue & Sue, 2008; Tseng, 2002). Specifically, this is useful for the comprehension of psychosocial experiences of multicultural persons, as well as providing insight to counselors about sociopolitical influence on the identity of culturally different individuals. These factors (psychosocial experiences and sociopolitical influence) should be taken into consideration during assessment and diagnosis in order to promote effective multicultural counseling (Kwan, 2001). Additionally, and specifically related to the college population, Chickering, a psychosocial theorist identified several developmental tasks or vectors facing college students. One of such tasks deals with college students establishing their identities and defining who they are (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Furthermore, in looking at identity structure, Phinney and Alipuria (1996) have noted that racial ethnic identity is considered crucial in fostering a sense of belonging or commitment to a particular group. Studies also show that having a strong secure identification or attachment with a racial ethnic group, enhances these culturally different students' self concept, and facilitates their integration with the college environment, thereby making it less likely that they would drop out of college (Murguia, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991; Wilson & Constantine, 1999).

In the area of career development, Zunker (2006) identified a few reasons why people work. One of them is psychological in nature, as many people derive their identity from their work, and also find it as a source of personal accomplishment. Another is economic, since work provides the financial resources to maintain life and improve the quality of life. The importance of securing work is especially critical for immigrants and their families given the difficulties such as acculturation issues, religious and parenting differences, language problems, and cultural differences, like individualistic versus collectivistic values that they face (Chung, Bemak, Ortiz & Sandoval-Perez, 2008;

Okocha, 2007). This essence of work is also echoed by Chickering & Reisser (1993) noting that developing a purpose in life, especially in the area of career development, is an important developmental task for college students. In addition, the relationship between identity development and career counseling has been emphasized by career development theorists like Super (1990) highlighting the role of self concept in career choice. He maintained that people should project themselves into the work environment during exploration phase (which traditionally occurs during college years) and, ideally, implement their realistic self concept into the world of work.

In light of the importance of both racial ethnic identity and career development as noted above, a review of the literature revealed that much of the studies in these areas for multicultural students focused on major American racial ethnic groups like African-American, Asian-American, and Hispanic/Latino and Native American college students (Sodowsky, Kwan & Pannu, 1995; Sue & Sue, 2008; Zunker, 2006). Unfortunately, limited attention has been given to the study of racial ethnic identity and career development concerns of college students from immigrant African and Hmong families (Schwartz, 2006; Tseng, 2002). This study is an attempt to deal with this problem. Addressing this problem is particularly crucial, because according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2002), the number of African and Hmong immigrants has doubled since 1990. In addition, studies show that the number of students from immigrant African and Hmong families in U.S. colleges has significantly increased in the last decade (Tseng, 2002; Fischer & Moradi, 2001). Furthermore, less than 14 percent of Hmong 25 years and older have a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Thus, it is important that counselors are adequately prepared to effectively counsel the target group of students in this study, as well as assist them to successfully complete their college education, and also become gainfully employed (Okocha, 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The primary goal of this study, therefore, was to explore the career development concerns and racial ethnic identity of college students from African and Hmong immigrant families.

Method

This was a qualitative study based on survey and semi-structured interviews.

Participants

The sample of participants of this study was drawn from a population of undergraduate college students from African and Hmong immigrant families. These students were attending a large public higher education institution in the Midwestern region of the U.S. at the time the investigation took place. An important criterion for participation in this study was that participants must have been born in the U.S. (by immigrant African or Hmong parents), or have come to the U.S. as an African or Hmong before the age of 8 (Elissa, 2005).

Forty potential participants were contacted, 20 qualified for the study, but only 16 volunteered to participate in it. Of the 16 participants, 8 (4 females and 4 males) were from African immigrant families. Their specific countries of origin include Ethiopia, Gambia, Nigeria, and Sudan. The remaining participants (5 females and 3 males) were

from Hmong immigrant families, and their original or immigrant homeland was Laos. A majority (68.75%) of the participants were born in the U.S. while 31.25% (2 African and 3 Hmong) came to the U.S. when they were under 8 years. Participants were between 19 and 23 years old.

Procedure

Initial contacts with potential participants were made via key informants such as co-presidents of African and Hmong Student Associations of the university, parents of the participants, university career counselors, and advisors of the participants. Additionally, participants were recruited for the study via snowball sampling, which according to Bogdan and Biklen (1998) entails generating participants through the help of other participants.

Information about the study was sent via email to all 40 potential participants. As noted earlier, only 16 qualified participants volunteered to be part of the study. There was at least an hour meeting with each individual participant, during which the informed consent form was signed, the study's questionnaire was completed by the participants, and their responses were clarified.

Measures

The study's questionnaire was made up of three sections. The first targeted demographic information such as heritage (African/Hmong), country of birth, age when immigration to the U.S. occurred, as well as the countries of origin of participants' parents. Items pertaining to age and gender were also included in this section.

The second portion of the questionnaire was designed to collect information about career development concerns. Twenty five items from a career counseling checklist (Zunker, 2006) were selected for this segment based on their relevance to the target population of this study. For instance, items that deal with the influence of race, ethnicity, religions, values, physical ability, family responsibilities, problems in personal life, gender, immigration status, lack of knowledge about the world of work, lack of information about one's skills, interests and values, etc., on career choice and career development were selected. Also, included in this section was an important item which read "I feel obligated to do what others want me to do, and these expectations conflict with my desires." Respondents were then instructed to circle all the items that apply to them in this section.

The third portion of the questionnaire dealt with racial ethnic identity issues. Specifically, participants were asked to respond to the following open-ended question and statements:

1. In terms of race and ethnicity how do you identify yourself?
2. On a scale of 1-100 describe your African versus American, or Hmong versus American identities. Explain your answer.

Data Analysis and Results

Simple descriptive statistics was used for analyzing the data.

Career Development Concerns

Four major areas of career development concerns were identified. These were:

1. Conflict with significant others (mostly parents) regarding desired or daydream career choice – 93% of the respondents maintained this was a problem. Some of the participants indicated some parental pressure for them to get into career fields like medicine, engineering and business, whereas they were interested in occupational areas like teaching, social work, journalism, and acting.
2. Fear of making a serious mistake with their career choice – 81% of the participants indicated this was a concern. A personal story shared by one of the participants would further elucidate this concern. This individual indicated that his older brother who has a college degree in engineering, after working in that field for two years became dissatisfied, left that field, and acquired a college degree in Nursing. This individual now works as nurse while pursuing a Master's degree in Public Health. This study's participant believed that his brother made a mistake in his initial career choice, and he did not want to suffer the same fate.
3. Assistance with placement activities including finding a job – 75% of the respondents reported this as a concern. Some of the respondents, especially students from Hmong immigrant families, expressed interest in networking with people from their cultural background when looking for positions in the world of work.
4. Difficulty narrowing down career interests – 68.75% of respondents indicated this was a problem.

In addition to the above concerns, about 44% of the participants noted that their ethnicity could limit their career choice. One of the Hmong respondents shared an illuminating personal story about this concern. He indicated that for a long time, particularly in high school, he had always wanted to be a professional basketball player. However, with time, he became convinced he would never be able to pursue that career field since he did not see any Hmong players in the professional basketball teams. Furthermore, he believed that his size and height made it difficult for him to get into such a career field. Consequently, he decided to pursue a related major – sports journalism.

Also, 37.5% of the sample noted that family responsibilities may influence their career choice. This was exemplified by one of the participants, who revealed that being the oldest among her siblings, coupled with the fact that her family was of poor social economic status, she was interested in pursuing a major that she could finish within a short time. This was because she wanted to contribute financially in helping her family.

Finally, 31.25% of the participants indicated that their immigration status could impact their career choice. For instance, a respondent noted that a science professional

field was chosen since it might be easy to get practical training employment opportunities in that field which could lead to a desired immigration status that could make it possible for this individual to remain in the U.S. for employment purposes.

Racial/Ethnic Identity

Students from African Immigrant Families. On the first question about racial ethnic identity, 50% (4 out of 8) of this group of students identified as either Africans or individuals from their respective countries of origin such as Ethiopia, Gambia, Nigeria, and Sudan. On a scale of 1-100, they noted 100 for African as their response to the second question about weighting their African and American identities. Three out of eight members of this group (37.5%) identified as African American. Within this subgroup of three, two persons, in response to the second question, noted 60 for their American and 40 for African identities, while one individual reported 50/50 for both African and American identities. Just one student (12.5%) identified as Nigerian American. This participant indicated that 70 represented Nigerian identity, while 30 was for American identity.

Students from Hmong Immigrant Families. Seven of the eight students (87.5%) described themselves as Hmong Americans. Within this subgroup of seven, on a scale of 1-100, three students indicated 60 for Hmong and 40 for American identities; three noted 40 for Hmong and 60 for American identities, and one reported 50/50 for both Hmong and American identities. Only one of the eight students (12.5%) indicated “100%” Hmong for both questions.

It must be pointed out that during the clarification process of the students’ responses, the following was observed. The participants seriously considered their personal values such as individualism versus collectivism, respect for elders, strong family ties, language, gender roles, and religious issues in weighting their identities.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

The results of this study have implications for counseling and student affair practice. First, counselors should be aware of the major career development concerns identified by this study’s participants, and explore culturally appropriate strategies for addressing them. For example, counselors should take into consideration, and be sensitive to the fact that students from the target population of this study come from a collectivistic culture when exploring the influence of family expectations and responsibilities on students’ career development. Second, it could be helpful for counselors to tackle students’ fear about making a serious mistake with their career choice and the problems with narrowing down career interests early (first year) in the students’ college life. This could be accomplished via group counseling since the group dynamic process provides opportunity for support and insight to group members (Okocha, 2001; Zunker, 2006). It is also useful to utilize appropriate and relevant formal and informal assessment tools to help students narrow their career interests. Additionally, informational interviews and shadowing individuals in occupational fields that appeal to students could be helpful for making informed career decision (Okocha, 1994).

Third, counselors could be of assistance to students in the area of placement services in a number of different ways. For instance, students could learn from college career counselors how to construct a résumé, acquire effective interview skills, and locate internship, and post-graduation employment positions. It is also useful for college counselors to compile a list of professional persons and alumni in a variety of different careers, and who reflect similar cultural backgrounds of participants in this study. This may be helpful to students for informational interviews and networking.

Finally, it is important that college student services professionals such as counselors, orientation, and residence life workers are knowledgeable about racial ethnic identity development. This is because, given the findings of this study, it appears that some of the students saw themselves as bicultural, (with reference to African or Hmong and American cultures), while some identified mostly with the cultures of their countries of origin. In other words, participants in the study reflected different stages of their racial ethnic identity development. This outcome and insight certainly have ramifications for counseling and programming activities for students in higher educational institutions. Hence, it is recommended that college student services professionals including counselors be versed on racial ethnic identity development models such as the racial cultural identity development model by Sue and Sue (2008) in order to provide effective and culturally appropriate services to multicultural students.

Limitations

The study's qualitative and descriptive design, coupled with its' non-random, and small sample size, limit the generalization of the findings. However, the results are considered valuable as they provide useful basis for expanding future research with the target populations of this study.

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